Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on language

This paper studies the linguistic philosophy of the Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) – and the latter's student Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) – bringing it into constructive dialogue with the ideas of the twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951). As Ibn Taymiyya's theory of language is situated within and emerges from his broader attack on the Aristotelian view of language upheld in classical Islamic intellectual thought (as well as in European philosophy), it becomes rewarding to read Ibn Taymiyyah alongside Wittgenstein, whose account of language was also couched within a broader attack on Aristotelianism.

Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language, particularly his infamous rejection of the distinction between literal/veridical (*ḥaqīqī*) and tropical/metaphorical (*majāzī*) utterances in language – a distinction that was well established across the major disciplines of classical Islamic intellectual thought: poetry, theology, exegesis, law and philosophy – has already received some scholarly attention.[1] However, of the extant studies of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language to date, many have been primarily concerned with explicating the *theological* implications and significance of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on real and metaphorical expressions. So although addressing the obvious overlap between the domains of theology and philosophy, these studies make no attempt to bring the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah or Ibn al-Qayyim into constructive engagement

[1] Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of Ḥaqīqa-Majāz Dichotomy," *Studia Islamica* 59 (1984): 111-140. For a discussion of the role of metaphor in theology and law, see Abdul Rahman Mustafa, *From God's Nature to God's Law: Theology, Law and Legal Theory in Islam*, (forthcoming). Ch. 1.
On Ibn Taymiyya's theory of language, see the brief references in Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2013), 22-23, 181-183. Gleave himself relies primarily on the more substantial study of Ibn Taymiyyah's pragmatics by Mohamed Yunus Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication.* (London: Routledge, 2009), 87-140. See also Abdessamad Belhaj, "Ibn Taymiyya et la négation de la métaphore." In *Continuity and Change in the Realms of Islam: Studies in Honour of Professor Urbain Vermeulen*, eds. K. D'Hulster and J. Van Steenbergen, (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 65–75; idem. *Questions Théologiques dans la Rhétorique Arabe*. (Piliscsaba, Hungary: L'ASBL Avicenne pour la Recherche, 2009). Ch. 4; idem. "Ibn Qayyim al-Ğawziyyah et sa contribution à la rhétorique arabe." In *A Scholar in the Shadow: Essays in the Legal and Theological Thought of Ibn Qayyim Al-Ğawziyyah*, ed. Caterina Bori and Livnat Holtzman, (Rome: Oriente Moderno monograph series, 2010), 151–60.

with discussions in post-classical linguistic philosophy in the West.[2] Yunus Ali, who in his *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics* offers the most thorough study of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language and situates his theory of language within his broader philosophical views, does not offer any substantive comparison between the linguistic theories of Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein.[3] Gleave, in his study of literalism in Islam, does make some brief remarks on Ibn Taymiyyah's views on the subject of literal meaning reminding one of Wittgenstein's position on meaning and use, but his primary interest does not lie in Ibn Taymiyya's linguistic theory, for which he relies largely on the summary offered by Yunus Ali.[4]

Notwithstanding the scarcity of attempts to embark on such an enterprise, a comparative study of the linguistic philosophies of Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein does reveal hitherto unexplored registers of meaning in the works of each of these figures. But it also does much more. As the last part of this paper will show, such a comparative study also offer possibilities for new forms of cross-cultural communication, not least in the domain of comparative theology. For in challenging the sweeping claims to certainty and objective knowledge made in the Aristotelian and classical traditions of philosophy, the theories of Ibn Taymiyya and Wittgenstein ultimately suggest that the best way for different religious and theological traditions such as Islam and Christianity to communicate with each other might not be through the intermediary of classical philosophy, by which one may arrive at ever more precise technical definitions of important terms and concepts within the two faith traditions: terms such as "God", "faith" and the like. Rather, the most profound possibilities for mutual comprehension and dialogue arise precisely when different theological traditions pay attention to the variety of

[2] Belhaj, "Ibn Taymiyya et la Négation de la Métaphore"; *Questions Théologiques dans la Rhétorique Arabe*; *Ibn Qayyim al-Ğawziyyah et sa Contribution à la Rhétorique Arabe*.

[3] Yunus Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*.

[4] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 23.

ways in which they have arrived at the meanings of the most important words in their theological lexicons and begin to apprehend the very different register of meanings these same terms might carry in other theological and linguistic communities.

I

The Traditionalist Philosophical Tradition

Ibn Taymiyyah was, as is well known, associated with the Ḥanbalī school of theology and law, although like many Ḥanbalī masters he exhibited considerable independence in arriving at his own opinions on matters legal, jurisprudential and theological.[5] The Ḥanbalīs were associated with the intellectual impulse labeled 'traditionalism' by George Makdisi, a term which is meant to describe the approach of those who upheld the priority of traditionally transmitted data (the Qurʾān, the Sunnah of the Prophet and the traditions of the earliest Muslims) above the rational sciences (such as philosophy) as a source of intellectual and moral knowledge.[6] On the other hand, the theological opponents of the Ḥanbalī traditionalism, a group which included Muslim

[5] See, for instance, Wesley Williams, "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse" *IJMES*, 34.3. (2002), 441-463; Manṣūr Muḥammad ʿAways, *Ibn Taymiyyah laysa salafiyyan*, (Cairo: Dār al-nahḍah al-ʿarabiyyah, 1970). For more on Ibn Taymiyyah's relationship with the Ḥanbalī school, see Abdul Hakim Al Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation*, (London: Routledge, 2006); Abdul-Rahman Mustafa, *On Taqlīd: Ibn al-Qayyim's Critique of Authority in Islam*. (Oxford: OUP, 2013); Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*. (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Jon Hoover with Marwan Abu Ghazaleh Mahajneh, "Theology as Translation: Ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa Permitting Theology and its Reception into His *Averting the Conflict between Reason and Received Tradition* (Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql)." *The Muslim World* 108 (2018): 40-86, Frank Griffel, "Ibn Taymiyya and His Ashʿarite Opponents on Reason and Revelation: Similarities, Differences, and a Vicious Circle." *The Muslim World* 108 (2018): 11-39.

[6] George Makdisi, "The Significance of the Sunni Schools of Law in Islamic Religious History." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10.1 (1979): 1-8; "The Juridical Theology of Shâfiʿî: Origins and Significance of Uṣûl Al-Fiqh." *Studia Islamica* (1984): 5-47; idem, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); idem, *Ibn Qudāma's Censure of Speculative Theology*. (London: Luzac & Co, 1962). See also Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

philosophers or *falāsifa*, such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (d. 595/1198), as well as the famous schools of Islamic dialectical theology – the Muʿtazilites, the Ashʿarites and the Māturīdīs – all accepted, to a greater or lesser extent, the validity of the philosophical method as an avenue to certain knowledge. Consequently, the figures and schools associated with dialectical theology called for revelation to be read in such a way that it accorded with what had demonstratively been shown to be true through philosophy.[7]

Because of their different attitudes towards philosophy, the *falāsifa* – and occasionally the theologians too – are often categorized as 'rationalists', thereby distinguishing them from the traditionalists, who prioritized scripture over philosophy. But what actually separates the two sides is not the acceptance of rationality or tradition by one and its rejection by the other. Rather, the disagreement between the Ḥanbalīs and their opponents arises out of their differences in accounting for the proper relationship between sound revelation and sound reason. These differences were expressed in a series of longstanding controversies revolving around the proper interpretation of scriptural passages that describe God in seemingly anthropomorphic terms. For like the Jewish and Christian scriptures before them, the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*s speaks of a God who ascends to the highest heavens and descends to the lowest ones, who is both pleased and angered and who turns His face towards His creation – or away from them. This created a dilemma for Islamic theological thought. Were such descriptions to be

[7] This argument is most often associated with Ibn Rushd. See for instance, Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa taqrīr mā bayn al-sharīʿah wa'l ḥikmah min al-ittiṣāl*, (ed. Nādir Naṣrī). (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1968); George Hourani, *On the Harmony of Religions and Philosophy: A Translation, with Introd. and Notes, of Ibn Rushd's Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl.* (London: Luzac, 1961); Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom & Epistle Dedicatory* (tr. Charles Butterworth). (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001).

accepted as they were – as the Ḥanbalī traditionalists suggested?[8] After all, the Ḥanbalīs reasoned, God authored the most perfect speech and declared that He spoke to make Himself known to man. If God had wanted His creatures to understand something other than the apparent meaning of His descriptions in the Qurʾān, He would have expressed this other meaning. Or were the philosophers and dialectical theologians correct in insisting that the seemingly anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qurʾān must be metaphorical because a veridical interpretation of such descriptions of God would necessarily entail that God was subject to motion, time and space and could therefore not be the unmoved mover whose existence was so painstakingly proved through a series of well-established cosmological arguments in philosophy and dialectical theology.[9]

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[8] George Makdisi, *Ibn Qudāma's Censure of Speculative Theology*. (London: Luzac & Co., 1962). There is, of course, a great deal of simplification in the account presented above. For more on the variety of views expressed on the issue within Ḥanbalī thought, see Merlin Swartz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb Akhbār aṣ-ṣifāt* (Brill: Leiden, 2002); Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghāzalī's Fayṣal Al-Tafriqa Bayna Al-Islam Wa Al-Zandaqa*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] For these accounts of the positions of the traditionalists and the dialectical theologians, see Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hindī, *Nihāyah al-wuṣūl ilā dirāyah al-uṣūl* (*Nihāyah al-wuṣūl fī dirāyah al-uṣūl*), eds. Ṣāliḥ al-Yūsuf & Saʿ al-Shuwayḥ?. (Makkah: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah, n.d.), 2:334; al-Rāzī, *al-Maʿālim fī ʿilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, eds. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd & ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1414/1994), 1:408; al-Rāzī, *al-Masāʾil al-khamsūn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Aḥmad Saqqā. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Thaqāfī, 1989), 43; al-Juwaynī, *Lumaʿ al-iʿtiqād fī qawāʿid ʿaqāʾid ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamāʿah*, ed. Fawqiyah Ḥusayn Maḥmūd. (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1407/1978), 103, 105; al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, eds. Muḥammad Mūsā & ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd. (Egypt: Maktabah al-Khānjī, 1369/1950), 44-45; al-Juwaynī, *al-ʿAqīdah al-niẓāmiyyah fī al-arkān al-islāmiyyah*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī. (Egypt: al-Maktabah al-Azhariyyah li al-Turāth, 1412/1992), 32-33; al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn*, eds. ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashār et al. (Alexandria: al-Maʿārif, 1389/1969), 543; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Fatwā al-ḥamawiyyah al*-kubrā, ed. Ḥamad al-Tuwajirī. (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumayʿī, 1425/2004), 514; al-Qarāfī, *Nafāʾis al-uṣūl fī sharḥ al-maḥṣūl*, eds. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, et al. (Makkah: Maktabah Niẓār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997), 2:879; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām al-muwaqqiʿīn ʿan rabb al-ʿālamīn*, ed. Mashhūr Ḥasan Āl Salmān. (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1423/2002), 4:58, 62; idem, *al-Ṣawāʿiq al-mursalah*, ed. ʿAlī al-Dakhīl Allāh. (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀṣimah, 1408), 2:632; al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azhar li al-Turāth, 1421/2000), 36, 94; idem, *al-Tamhīd*, ed. Richard Joseph McCarthy. (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-Sharqiyyah, 1957), 23-25, 338; ʿAd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*. (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿah al-Dawlah, 1346/1928), 106; al-Āmidī, *Abkār al-afkār fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Mahdī. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Wathāʾiq al-Qawmiyyah, 1424/2004), 2:20; al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*, eds. Hüseyin Atay, and Ibrahim A. Çubukçu. (Ankara, 1962), 112, 119; al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-maqāṣid*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAmīrah. (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-

The traditionalist Ḥanbalī intellectual movement is generally associated with three philosophical, theological and jurisprudential principles, which I have discussed elsewhere.[10] These are: the supremacy and self-sufficiency of scripture, the harmony of reason and revelation and the interpretive authority of the first generations (*salaf*) of Muslims. For the traditionalists Ḥanbalīs, the metaphorical interpretations of scriptural descriptions of God advanced by the philosophers and theologians were to be rejected because (i) these interpretations were not warranted by scripture (ii) they stood opposed to sound reason and (iii) they found no sanction in the collective interpretive tradition of the earliest generations of Muslims. Nevertheless, although the Ḥanbalīs were opposed to the particular metaphorical interpretations of seemingly anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qurʾān, no Ḥanbalī – and possibly no major scholar – before Ibn Taymiyyah ever engaged in a full blown rejection of the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical utterances on philosophical grounds.

II

The Conventional Theory of Language

The differences between the Ḥanbalīs and their opponents over the question of the validity of metaphorical interpretations of scriptural descriptions of God were made more complex by the fact that, by the classical period at least, both sides shared a common account of the origin and meaning of language as well as the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical utterances – a phenomenon that was in fact explained by reference to the origin of language itself.

Kutub, 1419/1998, 4:43), 61. See also Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*. (London: Macmillan, 1979); Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44; Hourani, *Averroes*, 27-28.

[10] Mustafa, *Taqlīd*, 37-59.

According to the conventional theory, the origins of language lay in an act of conventional assignation or *wadʿ*.[11] Although there were various opinions on how words themselves came to have meaning – by virtue of this meaning being inherent to them, as argued by the Muʿtazilite theologian ʿAbbād b. Sulaymān al-Ṣaymarī (d. approx. 250/864), by a revelatory act of God, or by some combination of divine fiat and subsequent human convention, as explained by the Ashʿarī theologian and jurisprudent al-Shīrāzī[12] – the majority of philosophers and theologians essentially held that language was originally established through convention, whereby certain utterances and words were assigned to signify certain objects.[13] This conventional account of the origin of language, in turn, explained the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical expressions. For according to most forms of the conventional theory, the original assignation of words through a process of ostensive definition was followed by subsequent instances of usage in which words came to denote objects other than those originally assigned to them. This, according to the conventional theory, was how metaphorical utterances and expressions came into existence.[14]

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[11] See for instance, al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-hurūf*, (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1990).

[12] On the differences between some of the various theories of *wadʿ*, see al-Rāzī, a*l-Maḥṣūl fī ʿilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, ed. Tāhā Jābir al-ʿAlwānī. (Beirut: Muʾassasah al-Risālah, 1992), 1:181-182.

[13] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 1:175, 181-182. For an account of the theory of *wadʿ*, see Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 16. See also al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq al-mursalah*, ed. Al-Ḥasan al-ʿAlawī. (Riyadh: Maktabah Aḍwāʾ al-Salaf, 1425/2004), 3:710; al-Hindī, *Nihāyah*, 2:320; Ibn al-Najjār, *Ibn al-Najjār (al-Futūhī), Sharḥ al-kawkab al-*munīr, eds. Muḥammad al-Zuhaylī & Nazīr Ḥammād). (Riyadh: Maktabah al-ʿUbaykān, 1413/1993), 1:191-192. See also Heinrichs, "Genesis" 111-140; Mustafa Shah, "The philological endeavours of the early Arabic linguists: Theological implications of the tawqīf-iṣṭilāḥ antithesis and the majāz controversy - part I," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 1 (1999): 27-46; idem. "The philological endeavours of the early Arabic linguists: Theological implications of the tawqīf-iṣṭilāḥ antithesis and the majāz controversy - part II," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 2 (2000): 43-66. For Ibn Taymiyyah's and Ibn al-Qayyim's views on metaphor, see ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm al-Maṭʿanī, *al-Majāz ʿind al-imām Ibn Taymiyyah wa talāmīdhih bayn al-inkār wa al-iqrār*. (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1416/1995).

[14] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, eds. ʿĀmir Jazzār and Anwar Bāz. (al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1998) 5:125, 7:62, 65-66; 20:222. See also al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl,* 1:289, Abū Yaʿlā, *al-ʿUddah fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, ed. Aḥmad al-Mubārakī. (Beirut: Muʾassasah al-Risālah, 1414/1993), 1:172; al-Mardāwī, *al-Taḥbīr sharḥ al-taḥrīr fī uṣūl al-fiqh al-Ḥanbalī*, eds. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Jibrain et al. (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 1421/2000), 1:389. On whether a word can bear its literal and

Ibn Taymiyyah on the Conventional Theory of Language

The influence of Ibn Taymiyyah's traditionalism on his linguistic philosophy can be seen in his arguments that the division between literal and metaphorical meaning is unsupported by scripture, unsanctioned by the understanding of the earliest Muslims and, crucially, irrational in itself. It is clear, for instance, that Ibn Taymiyyah regards the conventional theory of language as an alien accretion into Islamic intellectual culture. The dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical utterances established by the conventional theory does not, Ibn Taymiyyah insists, find any support in the statements of the Prophet and his Companions, nor in the works of the earliest authorities on Arabic grammar such as al-Khalīl (d. 173/789) and Sībawayh (d. 180/796), nor for that matter in the early works on legal theory, such as those of al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820).[15] In fact, Ibn Taymiyyah claims, the division of language into veridical and metaphorical was an innovation in Islamic intellectual thought introduced by the Muʿtazilah.[16] Clearly then, Ibn Taymiyyah's opposition to the conventional theory stems partly from the fact that, in his view, the scriptural interpretations justified by reference to this theory are not affirmed in the understanding of scripture upheld by the earliest Muslims.

However, this is far from the full story and a fuller understanding of Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of the conventional theory of language, particularly his rejection of the veridical/tropical division of language, can only arise out of the realization that this theory of language flows from Ibn Taymiyyah's traditionalist assault on Aristotelianism. Occasionally, as in Yunus Ali's study of Ibn

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metaphorical meaning together, see Āl Taymiyyah, *al-Musawwadah*, ed. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbbās al-Dharūrī. (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīlah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 1422/2001), 1:370.

[15] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:222-224, 246, 7:60. See also al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 7:708; Belhaj, *Ibn taymiyya et la Négation de la Métaphore*, 67.

[16] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:700. The editor of this work suggests that the Muʿtazilite litterateur al-Jāhiẓ was the first to deploy the term in the sense in which it eventually came to be used in conventional accounts.

Taymiyyah's theory of language, his ideas have been placed within their broader anti-Aristotelian context (although even in that case, as we saw, Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas are not brought into constructive dialogue with those of Wittgenstein). It is more rare to see studies of Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophical thought remark in any detail on the way in which Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophy buttresses his linguistic theory.[17]

In fact, it is still common to see Ibn Taymiyyah in particular and Ḥanbalism more generally misrepresented as a purely fideist impulse that did not engage with the philosophical and intellectual currents of Islamic thought.[18] Yet in Ibn Taymiyyah we have an example of a Ḥanbalī traditionalist who insists that precisely because there can be no contradiction between that which is known by sound revelation and that which is known by sound reason, any apparently reasonable system of ideas that opposes sound revelation can be shown to be irrational and inconsistent – not only by reference to revelation but also *on its own terms*. The Hellenic philosophical tradition is one such system of thought for Ibn Taymiyyah. Insofar as it is irreconcilably opposed to that which is manifestly established in revelation, Ibn Taymiyyah insists that this system of thought must itself be irrational.[19] Indeed, despite Ibn Taymiyyah's

[17] In his introduction to al-Suyūṭī's abridgement of Ibn Taymiyyah's famous attack on logic, Hallaq does not mention Ibn Taymiyyah's rejection of the veridical/tropical dichotomy as arising from his stance on Aristotelian philosophy. See Wael Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Other major studies of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on philosophy that do not discuss his views on language as an aspect of his philosophical thought include Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (eds.), *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013. See alo Ajhar A. Hakim, "The Forgotten Rational Thinking in the Ḥanbalite Thought With Special Reference to Ibn Taymiyya" *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 14 (2014): 137-154; Sobhi Rayan, "Criticism of Ibn Taymiyyah on the Aristotelian Logical Proposition" *Islamic Studies* 51/1 (2012): 69-87.

[18] See for instance Binyamin Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition" *The Muslim World*. 82 (1992), 256-272. Some of these errors were subsequently corrected in Binyamin Abrahamv, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism: A Short Introdution*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 101.

[19] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿaql wa al-naql*, ed. Muḥammad R. Sālim. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿah Dār al-Kutub, 1971), idem. *al-Ṣafadiyyah*, ed. Muḥammad R. Sālim. (n.p: n.p), 1406.

deep engagement with the ideas of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Sīnā, in which he shows himself to be one of the most engaged critics of Aristotelianism in the Islamic tradition,[20] many scholars accept far too readily that Ibn Taymiyyah's attitude towards classical philosophy is best summed up by his quip about philosophical study being like lean camel meat located on a mountain peak: toilsome to reach and incapable of providing much nourishment.[21]

The core of Ibn Taymiyyah's argument is that the association of the particular epistemic tools and modes of reasoning of Aristotelianism with reason itself is unsound. By these Ibn Taymiyyah means the technical definition and the categorical syllogism, neither of which, Ibn Taymiyyah argues, are capable of imparting knowledge that was not already known.[22] Ibn Taymiyyah attacks categorical syllogisms for being incapable of imparting meaningful knowledge, arguing that knowledge arises from the consideration of specific cases and not the extra mental universals that are utilized in categorical syllogisms.[23]

Ibn Taymiyyah's criticism of the categorical syllogism and the definition also form the overall context in which he attacks the conventional theory of language and meaning, according to which ostensive definitions were the method by which particular utterances are first used to

[20] Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of logic and Hellenistic philosophy is spread throughout his oeuvre. In addition to the *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā* and the *Darʾ*, see Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiqī. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿah al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah, 1370/1951); idem. *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad al-Kibtī. (Beirut: Muʾassasah al-Rayyān, 1426/2005); idem. *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiqī. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿah al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah, 1370/1951). Wael Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, remains the only complete English translation of an independent work on philosophy by Ibn Taymiyyah, as abridged by al-Suyūṭī. For an account of the reception of Aristotelianism amongst Muslim thinkers, see Muṣṭafā Ṭabaṭabāʿī, *al-Mufakkirūn al-muslimūn fī muwājahat al-manṭiq al-yūnānī*, tr. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Balūshī. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1990.

[21] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 19:89.

[22] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 9:27.

[23] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 2:32-38; 19:110; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqḍ*, 200-204, Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn,* 293, 302, 372; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāj*, 5:83. See also Sobhi Rayan, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Criticism of the Syllogism' *Der Islam*, 86 (1) (2011), 93–121.

signify particular objects, or particular apprehensions regarding objects. Contra the philosophers and theologians, whom Ibn Taymiyyah faults for regarding definitions as a form of certain knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that knowledge is entirely possible without definitions because a person who coins a definition must already know the object he is defining before he defines it.[24] This same criticism reappears in Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of the conventional theory of language and its account of the origins of language. For the conventional theory held, as we saw, that meaning in language can only come about through convention, which then justifies subsequent use. Ibn Taymiyyah raises two objections to this claim. First, he says, there is no evidence that those who speak a language ever came together to coin all the expressions used to denote objects in that language and to assign particular expressions to particular objects.[25] Second, and here Ibn Taymiyyah's criticisms of the conventional theory of language tie into his critique of the epistemic tools and resources of Aristotelian thought and its privileging of the definition as a source of certain knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim argue that conventional agreement on the meaning of words cannot arise prior to the use of a language in ways that already convey meaning.[26] Ibn Taymiyyah is, of course, reacting against what he perceives to be the error of the Muslim philosophers and theologians who, in his view, mistakenly regard philosophical definitions of conceptual terms as a more certain source of knowledge than scripture and therefore call for scripture to be interpreted in light of those definitions.[27]

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[24] Ibn Taymiyah, *Naqḍ*, 184-187; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn,* 38; Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya."

[25] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā,* 20:221-222, 224; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 2:384; For criticisms of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on *majāz*, see Maṭʿanī, ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm. a*l-Majāz fī al-lughah wa al-Qurʾān al-karīm bayn mujawwizīh wa māniʿīh: ʿarḍ wa taḥlīl wa naqd*. (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1985). al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:751

[26] Al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 3:701, 751, 760; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 7:61-65; 20:221-222, 224; idem. *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 2:384. For criticisms of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on *majāz*, see al-Maṭʿanī, a*l-Majāz.*

[27] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 9:27-28.

Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein: Towards a Constructive Reading

Wittgenstein proves to be an interesting and perhaps indispensable philosopher to read alongside Ibn Taymiyyah here because in his later period he too famously attacked the theory of ostensive definition, associated in Western philosophy with the figure of Augustine. In place of the Augustinian view he rejects, Wittgenstein advances an idea that is already present in Ibn Taymiyyah, namely that the meaning of language arises out of use.

As with Ibn Taymiyyah, Wittgenstein's attack on Augustine's conception of language and meaning is based on Wittgenstein's rejection of Aristotelianism, particularly the notion that a definition is essential to knowing a concept. "When I give the description 'The ground was quite covered with plants', do you want to say that I don't know what I'm talking about until I can give a definition of a plant?" Wittgenstein asks rhetorically.[28] Like Ibn Taymiyyah, who argued that a definition could only be coined by those who already knew the object being defined and that meaning could not arise out of convention because every conventional act of definition already assumes certain ways of using language in ways that already convey meaning, Wittgenstein also insists that in order to define an object one already has to know something about the object and about using language in ways that convey meaning: "So, one could say: an ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of a word if the role the word is supposed to play in the language is already clear.... one has already to know (or be able to do) something before one can ask what something is called."[29]

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (trs. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte). (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), § 70.

[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 30.

In the course of rejecting the conventional theory of ostensive definition associated with Augustine, which holds that one learns language by giving names to objects and then uttering those names to indicate those objects, Wittgenstein also points to what he sees as a fundamental flaw in such an account of language. The activity of speech, Wittgenstein says, involves using words to perform a variety of functions that do not involve naming objects. For instance, words can be used as exclamations (Away! Ow! No!) in distinct ways.[30] It is therefore a mistake to think that "language always functions in one way" or that it "always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts."[31]

Wittgenstein's attacks on conventional theories of linguistic meaning also overlapped with his attack on the other mainstay or Aristotelianism: the idea of universals, which Wittgenstein believed was unnecessarily privileged by philosophers in his own time. Wittgenstein was critical of philosophers who exhibited what he called a "contemptuous attitude towards the particular case" while privileging universal categories as the source of meaning[32] – criticisms that, as we have seen, also occupy a central place in Ibn Taymiyyah's criticisms of the conventional theory of language. Wittgenstein also explicitly connects the lure of universals with the emergence of incorrect theories of meaning. The "craving for generality", Wittgenstein argues, leads to the philosophical and epistemological error of trying to "look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term" and keeps us from analogizing between specific objects and seeing interconnectedness of things.[33] It is a mistake, Wittgenstein insists, to think of the meaning of a word as an image or a thing correlated to a word, as when

[30] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 27.
[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 304.
[32] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 18.
[33] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 17.

we think that the person who understands the term "leaf" has come to possess a kind of general picture of a leaf, as opposed to pictures of particular leaves.[34]

Wittgenstein also regarded categorical syllogisms, the mainstay of the Aristotelian method, as tautological and senseless objects. Just as Ibn Taymiyyah argued that the initial premises of a syllogism already contained within them the conclusion that was inferred in the final proposition, Wittgenstein also argues that to say that one proposition follows from another is to say that the first proposition already says everything said by the inferred proposition. In other words, the first proposition already presents a proper picture of reality, unlike a syllogism, which according to Wittgenstein is not a picture of reality and is therefore nonsensical[35] – a conclusion that follows from Wittgenstein's thesis that a proposition with sense must be a picture or model of reality if it is to have any sense; it cannot say *what* things are, only *how* they are.[36]

As with Wittgenstein, Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of Aristotelianism also goes hand in hand with his criticisms of the conventional linguistic philosophy prevalent in his day. Like Wittgenstein for whom syllogisms yield little or no knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that the definitions and categorical syllogisms championed by the philosophers do *not* constitute viable sources of knowledge of the sort that could be regarded as superior to scriptural proofs. Knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah insists, arises from the consideration of specific cases and not the extra mental universals that are utilized in categorical syllogisms.[37] In fact, one's knowledge of universals and even of basic rational truths is, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, itself dependent on analogizing

[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 18.

[35] See Ray Monk, *How to Read*, 49-50.

[36] Tractacus 3.221, 4, 4.01.

[37] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqḍ*, 200-204, Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn,* 293, 372; idem. *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 19:110; idem. *Minhāj*, 5:83; Badawī, *Maqāṣid*, 540. See also Rayan, "Criticism."

what is sensed and experienced to what is not. Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah says, the basis of knowledge is not the categorical syllogism but the sort of analogies used in Islamic juristic reasoning.[38] Foreshadowing Wittgenstein's criticisms of his contemporaries, Ibn Taymiyyah exclaims that Muslim philosophers, theologians and jurists have fallen in thrall to the spell of Hellenistic philosophy, from which they need to be awakened.[39]

It is clear, then, that Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein's theories of language are tied to their overall assault on Aristotelianism, particularly the idea that the meaning in language is created by ostensive definition. For both Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein, the Aristotelian tradition is mistaken in emphasizing the importance of knowing the definition and meaning of individual words and what they signify in themselves, by reference to classificatory criteria such as genus and differentia.[40] Against this view, both Ibn Taymiyyah and Wittgenstein reject the notion that knowledge of objects depends upon definitions and insist that meaning arises out of use. Thus in his *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein attacks both what he regards as the illusion that words must correspond to images of real things and also the theory of language associated with Augustine – whom Wittgenstein charges with adopting a pictorial conception of the relationship between objects and words – Wittgenstein explicitly states that the meaning of language is determined by use and does not arise prior to it. In most cases, Wittgenstein says, the word "meaning" can be explained in this way: "the meaning of a word is its use in the

[38] Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn,* 300, 417; idem. *Naqḍ*, 200-204; idem. *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 19:13; 11:187.
[39] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 2:59; 9:100, 124-125, 144; idem. *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn,* 64, 73, 94-95 238, 418.
[40] See Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought* I, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 24-5 and Chapter 2 passim.

language."[41] Elsewhere, Wittgenstein expresses the same idea thus: "But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use."[42]

A similar opposition to Aristotelianism animates Ibn Taymiyyah's rejection of the veridical/metaphorical dichotomy. Aristotle himself had addressed the concept of metaphor in his *Poetics* and later in his *Rhetoric*, which refers to the discussion in the former work.[43] While it not the purpose of this chapter to provide an account of Aristotle's views on metaphor, what is clear is that for Aristotle, and indeed for many of the classical philosophers and philologists who built on his ideas, the nature and function of metaphor is linked to other debates in the philosophy of knowledge. For as Kirby points out, a key observation of Aristotle is that the process of observing likenesses, which lies at the heart of constructing a metaphor, is a crucial cognitive step in reasoning about the world and articulating one's perceptions about what one sees.[44] Indeed, Aristotle himself, in the *Poetics*, explicitly compares the process of creating metaphors to doing philosophy, as both involve seeing similarities in things which are very different.[45] Our ways of constructing metaphors therefore become our ways of seeing and making sense of the world around us.

III

Ibn Taymiyyah on Word Meaning

[41] *PI* 1 §43

[42] Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 4.

[43] Aaron Wilson, "Peirce Versus Davidson on Metaphorical Meaning" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 47(2) (2011), 117-135, at 117. For a useful discussion of Aristotle's concept of metaphor and a bibliography of works dealing the subject, see John T. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor" *The American Journal of Philology*, 118.4. (1997), 517-554 at 518; William C. Greene, "Aristotle on Metaphor" *The Classical Weekly*, 39.12. (1946) 94-95; Samuel R. Levin, "Aristotle's Theory of Metaphor" *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 15.1. (1982), 24-46.

[44] John T. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor" *The American Journal of Philology*, 118.4.(1997), 537.

[45] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 3, 1412a9-12.

Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim are associated with the view that the distinctions between real and metaphorical expressions drawn by those who subscribe to the conventional theory are unsound, arbitrary and inconsistent.[46] One of the central arguments made by Ibn Taymiyyah against the proponents of the conventional theory, such as the Ashʿarī theologians, is that the latter do not have any objective and consistent criteria by which they can distinguish veridical expressions from metaphorical ones. Some of the criteria advanced by the Ashʿarī theologians in this regard – for instance, to regard a general statement as veridical and qualified one as metaphorical – lead, Ibn Taymiyyah argues, to conclusions which even the Ashʿarī theologians themselves regard as absurd. For, according to this distinction, most Qurʾānic passages imposing religious obligations would have to be regarded as metaphorical, since most general Qurʾānic commands (for instance "pray") might be qualified elsewhere (for instance "pray at time X" or "pray in manner Y"). But this, Ibn Taymiyyah points out, is a conclusion the Ashʿarīs cannot accept because they are strongly committed to the view that the law and scriptural legal injunctions are not metaphorical. In fact, Ibn Taymiyyah continues, even the Islamic proclamation of faith itself – "there is no God *except God*" – would have to be regarded as a metaphorical expression under the preceding classification because this expression also involves a qualification ("except God") to a general statement ("there is no God").[47] The very fact that the theologians who subscribe to the conventional theory continue to disagree over whether a command issued in the imperative form ("Do X") is used metaphorically to signify a recommendation or used in its veridical sense to signify an obligation shows, according to Ibn

[46] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:710.

[47] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:248-249, 262, 264, 7:69-70; idem. *Bayān*, 8:477. See also al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān*, 1:410-411; Zysow, *Economy*, 147.

Taymiyyah, that there is no absolute rule by which veridical and metaphorical usage can be distinguished.[48]

More fundamentally however, Ibn Taymiyyah's opposition to the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical utterances is based on his rejection of the account of the origin and meaning of language presented in the conventional theory. For as we saw earlier, the proponents of the conventional theory of language hold that the distinction between veridical and metaphorical utterances arises as a consequence of the way language originates. According to the conventional theory, the real meaning of a word is its original meaning, the meaning that is apparent by itself without any context, or that which first comes to mind when a word is heard. A metaphorical meaning, by contrast, is a meaning acquired by the word after its original conventional assignation – a meaning that is determined by the context in which the word is subsequently used.[49]

It is in the course of attacking this view of metaphorical meaning that Ibn Taymiyyah offers one of his most substantial and original contributions to linguistics: the proposition that a word by itself is incapable of conveying meaning. Although there were scholars before Ibn Taymiyyah who appear to have had their reservations about the conventional theory of metaphorical meaning, most notably the Shāfiʿī Abū Iṣḥāq al-Isfarāʾīnī (d. 418/1027), who had argued that once the context of a word has fixed its meaning it can no longer be regarded as metaphorical,[50]

[48] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:249.

[49] al-Armawī, *al-Taḥṣīl,* 1:237; al-Hindī, *Nihāyah*, 1:261; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:222. For more on the debates on the origins of language, see al-Subkī, *al-Ibhāj*, 1:197; al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā,* 2:10; al-Bāqillānī, *al-Taqrīb*, 1:320-326; Ali, *Medieval*, 53, 55-58.

[50] al-Armawī, *al-Taḥṣīl,* 1:232; al-Hindī, *Nihāyah*, 2:323-325; al-Samʿānī, *Qawāṭiʿ*, 2:77; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:220. Gleave suggests that Ibn Taymiyyah's theory can be seen as an "outgrowth of the 'contextually informed' position on interpretation developed by the Ḥanbalī Ibn Qudāma. See Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 182.

Ibn Taymiyyah appears to have been the first scholar in Islamic intellectual thought to launch a systematic attack on the very concept of word meaning.

The basic argument advanced by Ibn Taymiyyah is that a word by itself, devoid of context, signifies nothing and does not even constitute proper speech, as the latter term properly refers to complete expressions that convey meaning, which words by themselves are incapable of doing.[51] The meaning of a word, Ibn Taymiyyah argues, is invariably clarified, adjusted and ultimately determined by the context in which it occurs, its placement in a sentence and the expressions and practices of the speaker using it.[52] Since words only convey meaning within particular contexts that fix their meaning and make them unambiguous, and since speech cannot exist without context, it follows that all words in speech are real and not metaphorical.[53] Ibn Taymiyyah also dismisses the notion that the veridical meaning of a word is that which first occurs to the mind independently of context. Because words have no meaning independently of context, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, it is nonsensical to define the veridical meaning of a word as that which occurs to the mind independently of context. Rather, Ibn Taymiyyah argues, the meaning of every word is arrived at in context, which is why every usage of a word is veridical

[51] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 1:289; al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 3:719, 724-725, 751; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Risālah al-madaniyyah*, 31; idem. *al-Īmān*, ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī. (Cairo: Maktabah Anas b. Mālik, 1980), 83; idem. *Bayān*, 8:404; idem. *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 10:138, 20:222, 238-239, 250; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ʿalā al-mantiqiyyīn*, 77. For a discussion on whether or not marks replicating intelligible sentences should be considered a meaningful in the absence of any accompanying intent to convey meaning, see Mootz, "*Law*," 19-20. For a discussion of the way in which the sentence frame selects the sense of the words in it, see Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 16, 38. See also Yunus Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, Ch. 4.

[52] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 7:61-65; 20:226-227; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 2:714-715.

[53] Al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 3:701, 751, 760; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 2:714-715; ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 7:61-65, 66-67, 70-72, 20:221-222, 224, 239, 250; idem. *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 2:384. For criticisms of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on *majāz*, see al-Maṭʿanī, *al-Majāz*. See also al-Āmidī, *al-Iḥkām*, 1:72, 73.

and there can be no metaphorical expressions in language, at least according to the way in which metaphorical meaning is understood in the conventional theory of language.[54]

Ibn al-Qayyim, whose theory of language is often treated as a more systematic articulation of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory,[55] concurs with his teacher, adding that a word without any context that indicates the will of the speaker is akin to a sound signifying nothing – it does not become speech until it is accompanied by a clue indicating the meaning of the speaker.[56] It is the placement of a word in context, Ibn al-Qayyim says, that gives rise to a particular primary meaning in the mind of the auditor. The primary meaning, which first occurs to the mind, changes in accordance with the context and different arrangements of words forming an expression.[57] The word 'lion' by itself, for instance, does not signify anything meaningful, nor does it indicate the meaning of the speaker who utters it. However, in a particular context, it will either mean an animal or a brave person and in each case the context will make this usage real and not metaphorical.[58] Ibn al-Qayyim does not deny that some meanings of a word will occur to the mind before others. His point is rather that this primary meaning of a word will be determined by the particular context and semantic arrangement (*al-tarkīb al-khāṣṣ*) in which an utterance occurs.[59] Ibn Taymiyyah explains that even within sentences, clauses such as conditions,

[54] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 7:71; idem. *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 3:834; al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:719, 726-727.
[55] See Belhaj, "Ibn Qayyim al-Ğawziyyah et sa Contribution à la Rhétorique Arabe." Much of the literature on Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language refers to the views of his disciple as a more organized and accessible account of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory.
[56] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:724-725. On the various views on whether marks replicating intelligible sentences should be considered a meaningful in the absence of any accompanying intent to convey meaning, see Francis J. Mootz III, "The New Legal Hermeneutics" in *Law, Hermeneutics and Rhetoric*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 19-20.
[57] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:719, 725; Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Risālah al-madaniyyah*, 31; idem. *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyyah*, 8:404; idem. *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:238-239. See also Richard Swinburne, *Revelation*, 16 and 38.
[58] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:719, 725, 751.
[59] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 1:289.

exceptions and substitutions continually modify the meanings of words, making it impossible to insist that a single meaning of a word is what comes to the mind independently of all context.[60]

Ibn Taymiyyah also draws on the example of the word "lion" to provide an illustration of his views on language. In the context of a discussion on animals, Ibn Taymiyyah says, nobody will think that the "lion" being spoken of is actually a brave person. In a different context, the word "lion" will automatically be taken to signify a brave person and not an animal.[61] The meaning of language, therefore, cannot be determined by what first occurs to the mind of the auditor independently of context because what first occurs to the mind of the auditor is itself a result of the context. The relevant context includes the linguistic and interpretive community in which the auditor exists, one which shares a particular set of beliefs about the rationality of the speaker and his habit of obeying the normal maxims of conversation[62] as well as certain practices of interpretation. Even within the same linguistic community, Ibn Taymiyyah adds, the primary object signified by a word can change over time, sometimes assuming a contrary meaning to the one it bore in earlier times. This, he explains, is why scripture must not be interpreted according to the linguistic conventions prevalent in the time of later interpreters and exegetes but only according to the conventions prevalent amongst the Prophet and his Companions to whom the Qurʾān was revealed.[63]

Ibn Taymiyyah offers other examples of the way in which different uses of the same word can all be real and not metaphorical. The word "face", he says, can be used to refer to the face of a mountain, an animal or a human. However, each use of the term is, in its particular context, real

[60] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:250

[61] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:245; See also al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad Sulaymān al-Ashqar. (Beirut: al-Risālah al-ʿĀlamiyyah, 1997), 2:35.

[62] For more on this assumption, see Richard Swinburne, *Revelation*, 43; Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 79, 80, 86, 89.

[63] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 7:71; 20:245, 250; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jawāb al-iʿtirāḍāt al-miṣriyyah*, 10, 15, 17.

and not metaphorical because when used in the context of a mountain, the term face acquires a new meaning that it does not have when it is used to describe the face of a person.[64] Similarly, the Qurʾān speaks of the "house" of a spider, (Q., al-ʿAnkabūt, 29:41), God's "house" (Q., al-Ḥajj, 22:26) and the "houses" of the Prophet (Q., al-Aḥzāb, 33:53). According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the word "house" has not been used in an identical sense in each of these cases. In fact, although there is little similarity between the different types of houses mentioned in these verses, the term "house" is used in its real sense and not as a metaphor in each case.[65] A word signifying a number of objects that have a shared quality, Ibn Taymiyyah explains, can still refer to each of those objects in a real sense, not as a metaphor.[66] In terms very similar to those which would later be used by Wittgenstein, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that one frequently uses the same word to describe more than one object, knowing that the realities signified thereby vary considerably.[67] In the same spirit, Ibn al-Qayyim offers another example. Words such as "head" are, he says, always used in a descriptive sense rather than an unqualified sense. For instance, one speaks of the head of a person or an animal, the head of a group of people, the head of a river or stream etc. It is a mistake to assume that the term "head" must carry an identical meaning in each of these usages.[68]

The difference between the views of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim on the one hand and the majority of classical Muslim philosophers and theologians on the other can be seen in a hypothetical discussion in al-Rāzī's jurisprudential work, *al-Maḥṣūl*, which contains an abundance of philosophical and philological discussions and digressions. The specific details of

[64] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:238.
[65] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:236.
[66] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:238-239, 252, 255; idem. *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyyah*, 8:388; idem. *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 3:834.
[67] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:224-225.
[68] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:722-723. The same point is made in Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Īmān*, 82.

the debate in question need not detain us here. It suffices to note that the issue being considered is whether a disconnected exception to a general statement renders that statement ambiguous and metaphorical. The majority, according to al-Rāzī, regards a specified general statement, even where the specification is disconnected from the original statement, as unambiguous and non-metaphorical. Al-Rāzī, however, follows the Muʿtazilite Abū al-Ḥuṣayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044) in insisting that a disconnected exception[69] to a general statement renders that statement metaphorical.[70] This prompts a question from al-Rāzī's imaginary opponent: why can one not consider both the general statement and its exception to be real in their own rights? That is, why can a general term not signify its referents in light of external factors, such as a disconnected exception? This of course is exactly the position taken by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, who argue that the meaning of a term is arrived at in light of contextual data such as exceptions or specifications that adjust its meaning. For al-Rāzī, however, such a notion is not to be entertained. He responds to his interlocutor by saying that if this door were opened, there would be no more metaphor left on earth, for it could be said of every word that it carries a particular meaning but that this meaning can change in light of external factors.[71]

IV

[69] On continuous and disconnected exceptions, see Al-Āmidī, *Muntahā al-sūl fī ʿilm al-uṣūl*. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1424/2003), 138, 145; Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hindī, *Nihāyah*, 4:1510, 1605, 1609; Abū Yaʿlā, *al-ʿUddah*, 2:546; Ibn al-Najjār, *Sharḥ al-kawkab*, 3:278; al-Suyūṭī, *Sharḥ al-kawkab al-Sāṭiʿ*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ḥafnāwī. (Cairo: Maktabah al-Īmān, 1420/2000), 1:511.

[70] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 3:16, 21, 25; al-Qarāfī, *Nafāʾis*, 5:1948. On the ambiguity of general statements, see al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, 1:377, 2:70, 126-127, 384; Āl Taymiyyah, *al-Musawwadah*, 1:278; al-Hindī, *Nihāyah*, 4:1471, 1495; Ibn al-Najjār, *Sharḥ al-kawkab*, 3:160, 456; Abū Yaʿlā, *al-ʿUddah*, 2:525-526, 533; Ibn ʿAqīl, *al-Wāḍiḥ*, 3:335; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 6:265-266, 433; 7:102-103, 20:104; 29:91. See also David Vishanoff, *From Tradition to Law: The Origins and Early Development of the Shāfiʿī School of Law in Ninth-Century Egypt*. (Ph.D. Diss. Harvard University, 2009), 111.

[71] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 3:15.

Ibn Taymiyyah's position on the meaning of individual words devoid of context can now be contextualized within his rejection of the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical utterances as expressed in the conventional theory and also within his overall attack on Aristotelianism. For the status of an individual word and its ability to convey meaning is not, as we saw earlier, a contentious issue in pragmatics alone but also one that goes to the heart of debates in philosophy, epistemology and law. It is important to remember that the conventional theory of language attacked by Ibn Taymiyyah drew heavily on the heritage of Aristotelianism to justify its account of how language functioned. According to the Ashʿarī philosopher and theologian al-Rāzī (d. 609/1209), who played a decisive role in incorporating Ibn Sīnā's (d. 427/1037) philosophy – and therefore, by extension, Aristotle's philosophy – into Islamic dialectical theology, it is not possible for language to contain a term for every single object in existence as this would require an infinite number of words.[72] Therefore, al-Rāzī concludes, words are not assigned to external objects but to inner concepts, which are the lens through which specific objects are seen.[73] Consequently, al-Rāzī disagrees with the majority of grammarians who define speech as a collection of words that convey meaning. Against the grammarians, al-Rāzī champions the Ashʿarī theological position that a single word can constitute speech. Since a word contains meaning in the sense of universal mental concepts, al-Rāzī explains, a single word by itself must logically be able to constitute speech.[74]

Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas on language, along with those of some Ashʿarīs such as al-Shīrāzī, rest on a fundamentally different set of philosophical premises. Words, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, refer primarily to external objects and not to universal concepts. And as we recall, Ibn

[72] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl*, 1:197.

[73] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl,* 1:200 and Al-Qarāfī, *al-Nafāʾis*, 1:504, 507.

[74] Al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl,* 1:179.

Taymiyyah argues that a word by itself does not signify anything meaningful in speech.[75] This is a proposition justified both by reference to Arabic usage, in which a meaningful expression usually consists of a collection of words (usually a noun or subject coupled with its predicate)[76] and also by Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of the idea of universals. Ibn Taymiyyah holds that knowledge of things only comes from concrete specifics and not from abstract universals which do not have any real existence outside the mind. For example, one can acquire knowledge by coming to know of specific objects which are black, not by coming to know blackness per se, which has no real existence outside the mind. It thus follows, Ibn Taymiyyah concludes, that a word that refers to a universal concept is incapable of conveying knowledge or meaning and that without context, words do not constitute meaningful speech.[77]

Ibn Taymiyyah's rejection of universals, his rejection of definitions as a source of knowledge and his attack on the dichotomy between veridical and metaphorical expressions are therefore interlinked elements of a systematic philosophical account, although the digressive style of Ibn Taymiyyah's writings and the fact that he frequently develops his ideas across many different works sometimes obscure this fact.[78] In his rejection of the possibility of words by themselves having an original, veridical and non-metaphorical meaning which first occurs to the mind of the auditor when he hears a word independently of context, Ibn Taymiyyah is attacking both the conventional theory of language and its reliance on the concept of universals to explain how meaning is created out of language.[79]

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[75] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyyah*, 2:455, 8:477-478.

[76] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūᶜ al-Fatāwā*, 10:137, 12:246-247; idem. *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyyah*, 2:455, 8:477-478.

[77] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūᶜ al-Fatāwā*, 7:68; 20:224; idem. *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyyah*, 2:455.

[78] See for instance, Gleave's remarks that Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language "...has to be pieced together from different works rather than from a sustained discourse" by Ibn Taymiyyah or Ibn al-Qayyim. Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 22.

[79] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūᶜ al-Fatāwā*, 20:248.

Here again, Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas on language resonate deeply with those of Wittgenstein. For although Wittgenstein does not set out to attack the concept of metaphorical meaning with the same urgency and force as Ibn Taymiyyah, one of his key insights is that a single word can have different primary modes of signification depending on how it is used.[80] Wittgenstein's views therefore necessarily make any essential distinction between real and metaphorical meaning unsustainable – a consideration ignored by some of those who have argued that the use of metaphor is central to Wittgenstein's philosophy and his attempts to account for the workings of language.[81] Indeed, the introductory propositions of the *Tractacus* express Wittgenstein's conviction that words by themselves are meaningless. Thus, although the thrust of Wittgenstein's argument is different from that of Ibn Taymiyyah, behind it there lies the same rejection of the possibility of words conveying meaning by themselves. Words are meaningless insofar as they refer to objects, Wittgenstein declares in the *Tractacus*, adding that words only acquire meaning if they occur in propositions which, when they are true, are termed facts.[82] For only facts (i.e. propositions), according to Wittgenstein, can express a sense; a set of names cannot. That is, a name only has a meaning in the nexus of a proposition.[83]

In his later works, particularly the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein advances yet another set of ideas on the nature of linguistic meaning which bring to mind Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas on language. Like Ibn Taymiyyah, Wittgenstein suggests that meaning cannot arise out of ostensive definitions because even ostensive explanation, where "the meaning of a name can be explained by pointing to its bearer"[84] is also dependent on the speaker and auditor working with a shared

[80] *Tractacus*, 3.321, 3.323.
[81] Jerry H. Gill, "Wittgenstein and Metaphor" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 40.2. (1979) 272-284.
[82] *Tractacus*, 1.1, 3.14. Ray Monk, *How to Read*, 40
[83] *Tractacus*, 3.142, 3.3.
[84] *PI* § 43.

set of assumptions about how words are used in various speech acts.[85] These shared assumptions include the understanding that the same word can be used in different contexts to mean different things. These different uses of a word share a set of "family resemblances" which are a "...complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing..." much like the "various resemblances between members of a family".[86] It is these criss-crossing relationships that rise out of use, rather than any core meaning of a word in the abstract, which therefore determines the meaning of utterances, according to Wittgenstein. The function of words, Wittgenstein explains, is similar to the function of tools such as hammers, pliers, screwdrivers, nails and screws in a toolbox.[87] The common mistake of philosophers, Wittgenstein argues, is to be confused by "the uniform appearance" of words when in fact their function is determined by their "*use*".[88] In reality, Wittgenstein says, there are "countless different kinds of use of all the things we call 'signs', 'words', 'sentences'. And this diversity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten."[89]

Much like Ibn Taymiyyah, Wittgenstein's attack on Aristotelianism is all embracing, extending to the form in which Wittgenstein himself expressed his ideas in his early philosophy. In his *Tractacus*, Wittgenstein succumbed, as he would later see it, to the temptation of presenting his propositions of philosophy as terse logical axioms in the manner of mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers working in the Aristotelian tradition. However, in his later writings, Wittgenstein admitted that the sort of expressions he had used in the *Tractacus* were part of the

[85] *PI* § 28-33.
[86] *PI* § 66-67.
[87] *PI* § 11.
[88] *PI* § 11.
[89] *PI* § 23.

problem of philosophy and explicitly commented on the "diversity of kinds of words and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language" adding that he included himself within the class of philosophers who had failed to appreciate the diversity of ways in which words imparted meaning.[90] Discarding his earlier style of writing, which aimed for terseness and technical precision, in his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein embraced a style of argument that was conversational, digressive and steeped in a deep examination of the ways in which language was employed in real, everyday situations – qualities that also mark the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah.

In Ibn Taymiyyah's and Ibn al-Qayyim's ideas on language one finds a similar insistence on the idea that the meaning of speech is dependent on context, and that this context includes the knowledge one has of the speaker, his habits and customs of speech and also a set of assumptions about the particular speech act itself. Ibn Taymiyyah's views on the matter lead him into conflict with a substantial body of Muslim theological and jurisprudential thought, which held that the imperative grammatical form (i.e. "Do X") signified a command in its veridical sense and was only metaphorically used to signify recommendations and other meanings. For Ibn Taymiyyah, however, a word by itself cannot have a meaning unless it is placed in the context of a meaningful speech act. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah insists that the relative status of the speaker and auditor, the speaker's tone and his habits of speech, the situation in which the speech act occurs as well as general linguistic conventions are all contextual factors that determine the meaning of a speaker's words. This, once again, leads Ibn Taymiyyah to conclude that the distinction between the veridical and metaphorical meanings of imperatives is incorrect. Identical grammatical forms can still convey distinct meanings depending on the context in

[90] *PI* § 23.

which they are used, Ibn Taymiyyah insists. His example is drawn from an instance of Arabic usage which is not readily translatable into English although the point he makes can be made for any language.

In Arabic usage, it is customary to utter the formula 'God blessed X' after mentioning the name of a deceased individual. Ibn Taymiyyah points out that this utterance, despite appearing to be declarative in nature, is actually an imploration (*ṭalb*), whereby one is asking God to bless someone. Moreover, the imperative form used in prayer (God! Bless X) while appearing to be an imperative, is actually an invocation. The conclusion is clear: imperatives, implorations, invocations and declarations, despite the identity of their grammatical form, convey meanings that are distinct, and these meanings are revealed through the context in which the speech act takes place.[91]

One's assumptions about the identity of a speaker and his purpose in speaking are, according to Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, indispensable aids that allow one to determine the meaning of speech. Indeed, Ibn al-Qayyim points out, there are ways of arriving at meaning through a speaker's silence because of one's knowledge of the speaker. The *a fortiori* argument, for instance, depends on understanding a higher, unstated case, which has not explicitly been expressed, on the basis of a lower case that has been expressed.[92] In the famous example from Islamic law, one comes to know from the scriptural prohibition of verbally assaulting a person that assaulting that person physically is also prohibited. On the other hand, Ibn al-Qayyim adds, we also know that a person who utters a command while asleep does not will or intend to signify a command

[91] Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Tisʿīniyyah*, 2:634; 3:829-830, 840-841.

[92] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām*, 2:385-386; 4:519.

with his words and can therefore ignore these commands. This too, is an instance where the meaning of a speech act is created and determined by the knowledge one has of the speaker.[93]

A Grand Theory of Meaning(s)?

In place of the concept of universals – whose epistemic utility they reject – and of grand and universal theories of meaning and interpretation that identify the study of formal grammar, semantics and morphology as the only way to arrive at the meaning of speech, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim champion an anti-foundationalist approach to the problem of meaning. A central facet of this approach is its insistence that meaning can only be determined through a study of the particular speech acts and the contexts in which they occur and through one's familiarity with a speaker's customs and habits of speech, which allow one to know what a speaker means by his expressions.[94]

The use of contextual indicants to understand speech is, of course, one of the hallmarks of Islamic traditionalist legal thought, and features prominently in the earliest recorded work on traditionalist legal philosophy in the Islamic tradition, the *Risālah* of al-Shāfiʿī, in which the author discusses the "multiplicity of ways in which meaning [of the Arabic Qurʾān] is imparted."[95] Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim echo al-Shāfiʿī in holding that the meaning of expressions is determined by contextual indicants such as associated words, expressions and gestures that clarify which of the various meanings of a word is intended.[96]

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[93] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām*, 4:517-518.

[94] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq,* 1:386; 2:650, 658, 780; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Bayān*, 8:479, 483.

[95] See Ahmed el-Shamsy, *From Tradition to Law: The Origins and Early Development of the Shāfiʿī School of Law in Ninth-Century Egypt*. (Ph.D. Diss. Harvard University, 2009), 59.

[96] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 2:744, 752-754.

Indeed, one can also find echoes of this anti-foundationalist approach in the writings of jurists from other traditions, who often favor a similarly nebulous approach to resolving the problem of meaning. In the words of the British jurist Lord Wilberforce, interpretation is, properly speaking, a "non-subject", which "is really about life and human nature itself – too broad and deep and variegated to be encapsulated in any theory, or, really, to be taught."[97] Legal scholars are also acutely sensitive of the ways in which legal and judicial interpretation, which is commonly misperceived as some sort of rarefied exercise in textual divination, is actually largely – if not entirely – dependent on contextual indicants and a set of assumptions regarding the speaker and his speech. Andrei Marmor, for instance, remarks that legal language, like all other forms of speech, often imparts meaning based on the assumption that the speaker is using words in the way we are familiar with and that his speech does not, therefore, require elaborate interpretation.[98] And as a leading scholar of religious and legal hermeneutics, Jaroslav Pelikan, points out in his study of Biblical and constitutional interpretation, the ability to understand the meaning of language is itself dependent on the mind knowing – by virtue of the construction, subject, context and intention of the speaker – the sense in which words are being used.[99]

We find a similar insistence on the nebulousness of the interpretive process in the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, particularly in their rejection of al-Rāzī's view that the ability of language to impart meaning is always dependent on ten factors, such as proper knowledge of morphology, grammar and semantics.[100] Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim attack al-Rāzī's views, with Ibn al-Qayyim advancing no less than 73 arguments against al-Rāzī's views on

[97] Aharon Barak, *Purposive Interpretation in Law*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 42.
[98] Andrei Marmor, *Interpretation and Legal Theory*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 13, 16.
[99] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 105-106
[100] al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 51; idem *al-Arbaʿīn*, 2:251-253; idem *al-Maṭālib*, 9:113-118; idem. *al-Maḥṣūl,* 1:390-391; idem, *Asās*, 215, 220, 234-235.

language and its ability to impart meaning in his *al-Ṣawāʿiq al-mursalah*, a work that attacks the philosophers and theologians for setting aside the veridical meaning of scriptural expressions in favor of metaphorical ones.[101] One of the central arguments made by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim is that the ability of language to impart meaning cannot be reduced to a limited number of factors such as those enumerated by al-Rāzī.[102] For Ibn Taymiyyah, language is far more complex, akin to a maze, which is exactly how Wittgenstein describes language: as something resembling " an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods: and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."[103]

This approach to the problem of meaning also reinforces Ibn Taymiyyah's and Ibn al-Qayyim's theological and jurisprudential thought. Given his view that the meaning of speech is known through one's knowledge of the speaker and His habits and customs of speech, Ibn Taymiyyah proposes a theory of exegesis that calls for the Qurʾān to be interpreted first and foremost through the study of the Qurʾān itself.[104] The speech of God, no less than other forms of speech, can only be properly understood in light of a set of governing assumptions about the identity of the speaker and His purpose in speaking. One is to assume, for instance, that the speech of God is going to be clear and intended to convey meaning, not obscure and intended to befuddle.[105]

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[101] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq al-mursalah.* It is because we do not yet have a complete copy of the original work that scholars attempting to trace Ibn al-Qayyim's ideas have often referred to the abridgment of this work, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq al-mursalah*, by the Ḥanbalī scholar al-Mawṣilī.

[102] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Bayān*, 8:479, 480-483; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 2:650, 680.

[103] *PI*, § 18.

[104] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 13:18, 19:127-128, 28:189, 192, 29:12. See also Walid A., "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis*" in Rapoport Y. and Shahab Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010).
Ibn Taymiyyah, *Bayān*, 8:515, 527; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām*, 2:91; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 2:780.

[105] Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawāʿiq*, 2:680-681, 696, 711, 713, 775.

This theory of exegesis would later become popular through its incorporation and dissemination in the works of ibn Taymiyyah's disciples Ibn Kathīr, whose career was not as marked by controversy as that of his master.[106] The same principle informs Ibn Taymiyyah's views on the interpretation of contracts, trusts and performative speech acts such as the legal formulas used to enact marriages, divorces and even sales. In all such cases, Ibn Taymiyyah opposes jurists who adopt a formalistic approach to performative legal expressions, arguing instead that rather than binding people to the standard legal meaning of particular legal expressions which they might have used without intending their legal effect, one ought to consider what a legal subject meant by his particular and contextual use of a legal expression. Take for instance the case of a husband who utters a vow to divorce his wife if she performs a certain act, which the wife then performs. The majority of Islamic legal opinion would consider a divorce to have taken place. Ibn Taymiyyah, however, argues that such declarations are not always intended to signify an intent to divorce. Rather, he says, they can be intended to deter one's spouse from performing a certain act. In such cases, Ibn Taymiyyah says, it would be incorrect to bind the husband to a particular meaning of his speech act which he never intended.[107] Significantly, Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion of this legal problem explicitly refers to the question of the proper meaning of words and he draws together, as is his wont, a legal discussion on the matter in question with theological discussions on the proper meaning of scriptural descriptions of God, showing how both are linked by a common thread – namely a coherent theory of speech and meaning.[108]

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[106] Walid A. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis*" in Rapoport Y. and Shahab Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a study of the relationship between Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Kathīr, see Younus Mirza, *Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373): His Intellectual Circle, Major Works and Qur'anic Exegesis*. (Ph.D. Diss. Georgetown University, 2012).

[107] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 33:29-30, 75.

[108] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 33:99-106; 29:12, 125, 246; 21:135; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām*, 2:217-220, 4:109. Gleave briefly discuses the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language on the discipline of jurisprudence and states

V

There is nothing new in the observation that Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of language buttresses his traditionalist theological position on the proper interpretation of divine attributes mentioned in scripture. Yet this is merely one of many possible theological implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory. In this concluding section, we shall briefly consider another of the potential theological implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's views on language, namely the ways in which it enables new forms of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. First, as the comparison of Ibn Taymiyyah's and Wittgenstein's ideas on language has shown, there is much that is common between traditionalist Muslim philosophy and many of the schools of post-classical philosophical thought in Europe and North America, particularly when it comes to their criticisms of Aristotelian and neo-Platonic systems of thought. This common skepticism about the foundations and structure of classical philosophy in turn allows a new kind of theological dialogue to take place between Muslims and Christian theologians who are interested in recovering an understanding of the divine that takes as its primary ground the descriptions of God in scripture rather than the tradition of theological dialectics influenced by classical philosophy.

While Islamic intellectual culture possessed, in the works of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, a fairly well developed defense of the thesis that the meaning of words arose out of use and that the veridical/metaphorical dichotomy was fundamentally flawed, Western philosophical thought did not produce a comparably robust defense of these positions until Wittgenstein. In the years and decades following the dissemination of his works, however, Wittgenstein's heirs

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that his ideas had limited impact outside of Salafī circles and even there, were often used in ways that are not entirely consistent with Ibn Taymiyyah's own views. See Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 182-183.

have undertaken the sort of reexamination of the veridical/metaphorical dichotomy that Ibn Taymiyyah sought to develop.[109] John Searle for instance, sets out to challenge "the view that for every sentence the literal meaning of the sentence can be construed as the meaning it has independently of any context whatever." In its place, Searle champions the view that "in general the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of contextual or background assumptions."[110] Yet another attempt to argue against the idea that literal interpretation of utterances must computed before non-literal interpretations was made by Récanati, who has also made a strong case for contextualism, arguing that sentences only express a determinate content in the context of a speech act. [111] Donald Davidson also registers his disagreement with a range of philosophers, starting from Aristotle, for the way in which they conceive of metaphors, and suggests that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" and there therefore be no metaphorical truth.[112]

Without essentializing what are, obviously, very different accounts of language and meaning, it is clear that insofar as Muslim intellectuals such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim and Western philosophers such as Wittgenstein and his heirs break with classical theories of language, reading such thinkers creatively alongside each other will reveal latent and hitherto

[109] For a general discussion of the theological implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy, see Fergus Kerr, "Metaphysics and Magic: Wittgenstein's Kink." In Philip Blond, *Post-secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*. (Taylor & Francis, 1997), 127-136.

[110] John R. Searle "Literal Meaning" *Erkenntnis*, 13.1. (1978), 207-224.

[111] François Récanati, "The Alleged Priority of Literal Interpretation," *Cognitive Science*, 19 (1995), 207-232. See also François Recanati, *Literal Meaning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[112] Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean" in *Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 245-264. For contemporary investigations into the nature of metaphor, see Dennis Sobolev, "Metaphor Revisited" *New Literary History*, 39.4. (2008) 903-929.

unrealized possibilities for transformations in the philosophical understanding of language and meaning.

Breaking free of the hold of the veridical/tropical dichotomy, and of the weight of classical philosophy which supports the distinction, also allows Christian and Muslim theologians to engage in dialogue with each other in ways that were simply unavailable to the majority of classical theologians working within the framework of Aristotelianism (Ibn Taymiyyah, whose *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* is the most voluminous Muslim response to Christianity in the classical period, was a notable exception to this trend). For theologians working in post-classical systems of thought, it is no longer necessary to move away from scripture to the supposedly more neutral domain of rational philosophy by which to demonstrate the truth of their beliefs. Rather, theologians Christian and Muslim theologians today can engage in dialogue about how what it might mean for them to understand the descriptions of God contained in their respective scriptures as real rather than metaphorical.

Ibn Taymiyyah, as we saw, offered one account of what such an attempt to understand scriptural descriptions of God might look like. But, quite apart from his own inconsistencies on the subject, there is no reason to infer from his general theory of language that his account of the specific interpretations of scriptural descriptions of God must represent the last word on the subject. This has been shown in the field of Biblical Studies by scholars whose account of language shares Ibn Taymiyyah's and Wittgenstein's views about the possibility of multiple real meanings without any recourse to metaphor but who still offer an account of scriptural depictions of God that differs significantly from that of Ibn Taymiyyah. David Aaron, for instance, develops his critique of the standard account of metaphorical expressions in the Bible by dismissing what he regards as the flawed theories which suggest that man is naturally disposed to think

metaphorically,[113] and that the meaning conveyed by words needs to be precise in order for language to work.[114] On the contrary, Aaron argues that the complexity and fuzziness of terms is a desirable feature of language as it allows one to engage in analogical reasoning whereby one traces similarities between words and concepts that are similar but not identical. Therefore, Aaron concludes, to demand an absolute exactitude of language is to "judge something defective with regard to some aspect that is irrelevant to its purpose".[115]

Aaron also rejects the vaunted account of metaphor presented in what he terms the Lakoff-Turner-Johnson thesis, which emphasizes the importance of metaphor in human thought and language. Aaron argues that the defense of metaphor in scripture advanced in this thesis ends up challenging the truth of scripture and indeed the very notion of truth itself.[116] A central feature of contemporary, secular thinking about scripture and religion, Aaron argues, is its willingness to grant that scripture might contain metaphorical truth but its unwillingness to countenance the idea that scriptural truth is the same kind of objective truth that is associated with scientific or mathematical propositions. These might be novel ideas in the world of Biblical studies, (Aaron's book was published in 2001) but students of Ibn Taymiyyah will be familiar with them since the Taymiyyan philosophical tradition insists that allowing scripture to be interpreted metaphorically is to place it on a lower register on the scale of truth. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyyah points out that the philosophers and dialectical theologians who favor metaphorical

[113] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities,* 10, 102. See also Swinburne, *Revelation*, 38, 43.

[114] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 74-76.

[115] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 16, 75, 76, 78.

[116] See Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 105, where he comments on the following remarks by Lakoff and Turner: "the truth is always relative to a conceptual system, that any human conceptual system is mostly metaphorical in nature, and that, therefore, there is no fully objective, unconditional, or absolute truth."

interpretation themselves accept that a metaphor is an untruth, since one of their definitions of a metaphorical utterance is that which can be negated for not being true.[117]

Aaron's arguments against metaphorical interpretations of the Bible often contain the sorts of arguments made by traditionalist Ḥanbalīs against the *falāsifa* and dialectical theologians. Consider Aaron's argument that it is a mistake to regard Biblical expressions such as "God is King" as metaphors on the grounds that the term "king" can only metaphorically refer to God. For as Wittgenstein's remarks on language-games show us, a word need not carry the same meaning across all its usages. Rather, different usages of a word carry a family resemblance and each usage is proper in itself.[118] Thus, Aaron argues, the fact that God might not have been a king exactly as Saul, David and Solomon were kings is about as relevant as the fact that kingship for the seventeenth century Wampanoag king Philip (d. 1661) was structurally and sociologically (not to mention religiously), utterly different from that of the thirteenth century French king Philip (d. 1314) and both of these were different from the kingship of Gilgamesh, the one-quarter human and three-quarters god-king of Uruk.[119] Similarly, to say that the expression "Israel is the son of God" is metaphorical is, David argues, to presume anachronistically the primacy of biology in Israelite perceptions of kinship.[120] One can, Aaron suggests, equate things literally using simple extensions of basic structural terms without insisting that the things equated thus be ontologically identical or metaphorical.[121]

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[117] See al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 3:715; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 20:266. For other Ḥanbalī discussions that touch on this topic, see Āl Taymiyyah, *al-Musawwadah*, 1:376; Abū Yaʿlā, *al-ʿUddah*, 2:700.

[118] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities, Metaphor*, 39.

[119] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities, Metaphor*, 40.

[120] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities, Metaphor*, 62-63.

[121] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities,* 60-61; Swinburne, *Revelation*, 48-49.

Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim employ almost identical arguments against the dialectical theologians who insist that the personal and dynamic attributes of God, such as His hands, are a metaphorical way of referring to His power. Such interpretation is unnecessary, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, who points out that the theologians themselves accept that the term power is properly used in relation to a gnat, an elephant and a king, despite the fact that the power of each is of a different kind. If the term power can be used non-metaphorically to refer to such disparate types of power because of their underlying similarity, why must we regard the use of the term 'lion' to refer to a brave man as metaphorical?[122]

For modern theologians and philosophers, not beholden to the system of Greek thought than as were their predecessors, there is a liberation of sorts in the radical outcome of Ibn Taymiyyah's and Wittgenstein's accounts of language, both of which originate and conclude with a realization of the limitations of human language and speech. When it comes to explaining how language itself (as opposed to particular utterances) comes to signify meaning, Wittgenstein has, quite literally, *nothing* to say: "What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses *itself* in language, language cannot represent...What can be shown *cannot* be said."[123] The whole emphasis of Ibn Taymiyyah's theology is also precisely to demonstrate that philosophy is, by the very limitations of its epistemic, conceptual and linguistic resources, limited in what it can say about the transcendent. For Ibn Taymiyyah, the most meaningful things one can say about God are those said by God Himself. Philosophy, if it is to be successful, must realize its inability to say much that is meaningful about God beyond what He has said Himself. Wittgenstein also asserts the importance of recognizing the limitations of conventional philosophical thought and admitting that there are things that cannot be said. For Wittgenstein,

[122] al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawāʿiq*, 3:723.

[123] Tractacus, 4.1211, 4.1212.

as for Ibn Taymiyyah, the key to solving philosophical disputes lies not in understanding facts about the world but in understanding the role being played by different types of words in the construction of propositions.[124] Once the limitations of philosophy have been recognized, one can see through or above philosophical controversies and see that the real task of philosophy is to "struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language"[125] Ibn Taymiyyah's theology therefore finds its ultimate expression in the famous concluding proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tratacus*: "whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent."

[124] Ray Monk, *How to Read*, 40.

[125] *PI* § 109.